

Organizational Research Methods

<http://orm.sagepub.com/>

Introduction : Understanding and Dealing With Organizational Survey Nonresponse

Steven G. Rogelberg and Jeffrey M. Stanton
Organizational Research Methods 2007 10: 195
DOI: 10.1177/1094428106294693

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://orm.sagepub.com/content/10/2/195>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[The Research Methods Division of The Academy of Management](#)

Additional services and information for *Organizational Research Methods* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://orm.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://orm.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://orm.sagepub.com/content/10/2/195.refs.html>

Introduction

Understanding and Dealing With Organizational Survey Nonresponse

Steven G. Rogelberg

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Jeffrey M. Stanton

Syracuse University

A survey is a potentially powerful assessment, monitoring, and evaluation tool available to organizational scientists. To be effective, however, individuals must complete the survey and in the inevitable case of nonresponse, we must understand if our results exhibit bias. In this article, the nonresponse bias impact assessment strategy (N-BIAS) is proposed. The N-BIAS approach is a series of techniques that when used in combination, provide evidence about a study's susceptibility to bias and its external validity. The N-BIAS techniques stem from a review of extant research and theory. To inform future revisions of the N-BIAS approach, a future research agenda for advancing the study of survey response and nonresponse is provided.

Keywords: *surveys; nonresponse; survey response; bias; response rates*

Field surveys can provide rich information to researchers interested in the human situation as it exists in vivo. In the context of organizational research, surveys can effectively and efficiently assess stakeholder (employees, management, students, clients) perceptions and attitudes for a variety of purposes. According to Kraut (1996), survey purposes include the pinpointing of organizational concerns, observing long-term trends, monitoring program impact, providing input for future decisions, adding a communication channel, performing organizational behavior research, assisting in organizational change and improvement, and providing symbolic communication. Because the value of a survey in addressing these purposes is dependent on individuals participating in the research effort, low response rates are a perennial concern among researchers and others who conduct, analyze, interpret, and act on survey results.

Low response rates can cause smaller data samples. Smaller data samples decrease statistical power, increase the size of confidence intervals around sample statistics, and may limit the types of statistical techniques that can effectively be applied to the collected data. A low response rate can also serve to undermine the perceived credibility of the collected data in the eyes of key stakeholders (Luong & Rogelberg, 1998). Most important, low response rates can undermine the *actual* generalizability of the collected data because of

Authors' Note: Both authors contributed equally to this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Steven Rogelberg, Organizational Science/Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001; e-mail: sgrogeb@email.uncc.edu.

nonresponse bias. Where nonresponse bias exists, survey results can produce misleading conclusions that do not generalize to the entire population (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998).

Research on issues pertaining to nonresponse has a long history; the research continues today as evidenced by a quick look at the large number of recent publications and books referenced in the articles in this feature topic. F. Stanton (1939) wrote one of the first empirical pieces on the topic in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* titled, "Notes on the Validity of Mail Questionnaire Returns." This was quickly followed up by Suchman and McCandless's (1940) *Journal of Applied Psychology* article titled, "Who Answers Questionnaires?" W. Edwards Deming (1953), the father of statistical process control and total quality management, is sometimes reckoned as the first to develop a framework for understanding the impacts and trade-offs of nonresponse, although public opinion research pioneer Helen Crossley published scholarly work on nonresponse that predated Deming's (e.g., Crossley & Fink, 1951). In the wake of the 1948 U.S. presidential election—when opinion poll predictions favoring Dewey over Truman proved spectacularly wrong—survey researchers began to focus systematically on threats to the validity of their conclusions. The realization of how badly nonresponse bias could affect the interpretation of survey results was a key driver behind the development of a wide variety of techniques to enhance response rates.

Setting aside for the moment the extensive literature on techniques to increase response rates, examinations of nonresponse tend to fall into two primary categories, one focusing on the detection and estimation of the extent of nonresponse bias and the other focusing on statistical methods of compensating for nonresponse (e.g., through imputation of missing data). Two of the most influential scholarly works in the area of nonresponse exemplify these two streams of research. Armstrong and Overton (1977) published a widely cited set of strategies for estimating nonresponse bias in survey studies, whereas Rubin (1987) developed a book-length treatment of methods for imputing data in sample surveys. Closer to home in the organizational literature, a further distinction is made based on level of analysis, with researchers such as Tomaskovic-Devey, Leiter, and Thompson (1994) focusing on nonresponse by organizational representatives when the sampled unit is organizations, whereas others such as Rogelberg, Luong, Sederburg, and Cristol (2000) examined nonresponse by employees within organizations.

In this article, we take a brief look backward by examining organizational survey nonresponse and identifying key issues and implications related to response rates and nonresponse bias. Given existing knowledge, we ask and answer the question of what a survey researcher can do to test for and examine whether obtained data are bias susceptible. Next, we look forward and propose a research agenda for advancing the study of survey nonresponse.

Elusive "Acceptable" Response Rate

Based on extant literature (Dillman, 2000; Fowler, 2002; Fox, Crask, & Kim, 1988; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978; James & Bolstein, 1990; Yammarino, Skinner, & Childers, 1991; Yu & Cooper, 1983), well-known response facilitation techniques are presented in Table 1. More important, though, even researchers who have the time and resources to follow all of these recommendations will rarely achieve 100% response. In addition, the problem of nonresponse appears to be worsening over time. For example, Baruch (1999) reported that in 1975, the typical survey response rate for studies in the top organizational research journals

Table 1
Response Facilitation Approaches

Facilitation Technique	Summary
Prenotify participants	Prepare potential participants for the survey process by personally notifying them that they will be receiving a survey in the near future.
Publicize the survey	Actively publicize the survey to respondents (e.g., posters, e-mails). Inform survey respondents about the purpose of the survey and how survey results will be used (e.g., action planning).
Design carefully	Consider the physical design of your survey: Is it pleasing to the eye? Easy to read? Uncluttered? Are questions evenly spaced?
Provide incentives	Provide upfront incentives to respondents, where appropriate. Inexpensive items such as pens, key chains, magnets, or certificates for free food/drink have been shown to increase response rates.
Manage survey length	Use a theory-driven approach to survey design, which will help determine critical areas that should be addressed within the survey instrument as opposed to including too much content.
Use reminder notes	Send reminder notes to potential respondents beginning 3 to 7 days after survey distribution.
Provide response opportunities	Ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to participate in the survey process (e.g., provide paper surveys where employees do not have access to computers, schedule time off the phone for employees in call centers, have survey run for sufficient time so that vacation time does not impede response).
Monitor survey response	Monitor response rates so that HR generalists and/or the survey coordinators can identify departments with low response rates. Provide feedback and consider fostering friendly competition between units.
Establish survey importance	An understanding of the importance of their opinions and participation will help increase the likelihood of survey completion.
Foster survey commitment	When applicable, involve a wide range of employees (across many levels) in the survey development process.
Provide survey feedback	Once the survey data are collected, survey feedback should be provided. Rather than influencing the present survey, this approach influences future survey efforts by positive use of the survey results.

(e.g., *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Academy of Management Journal*) was 64.4%. In 1995, however, the typical survey response rate reported in these same journals dropped to approximately 50%. Neither the use of Web-based survey techniques nor other emerging data collection technologies (e.g., surveys on handheld devices) has proved a panacea for increasing response rates (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000). Furthermore, given the popularity of opinion polls, the emergence of hundreds of online survey outfits, and the predilection of organizational managers for insight into the attitudes and beliefs of constituents and stakeholders, oversurveying has worsened the situation (Weiner & Dalessio, 2006). Perhaps as a result of these continuing declines, the bar for "acceptable" response rates is also quite low.

Many research reports containing survey results often justify an obtained response rate on the basis of how it is consistent with industry standards or what is typically found in a given area of research. Although such descriptions do put a response rate into context, the fact that everyone else also achieves 30%, 40%, or 50% response does *not* help to demonstrate

that the reported research is free from nonresponse bias. If the standard response rate in one's research area is 45% and a new article in the same area achieves 55%, we suggest that using this achievement to claim superior results is folly because the difference between the new study's response rate and the standard contains little if any information about the presence, magnitude, or direction of nonresponse bias present in the data.

In contrast, if a study does obtain a response rate well below some industry or area standard, this also does not automatically signify that the data obtained from the research were biased. Thus, researchers who suppress or minimize the importance of results on the basis of a low response rate have also done a disservice to their audience, by failing to analyze whether their low response rate truly had a substantive impact on conclusions drawn from the data. In the absence of good information about presence, magnitude, and direction of nonresponse bias, ignoring the results of a study with a 10% response rate—particularly if the research question explores a new and previously unaddressed issue—is just as foolish as assuming that one with a response rate of 80% is unassailable. In the following section, we dissect nonresponse bias in greater detail to document exactly why this is so.

The Nature of Nonresponse Bias

Nonresponse bias is traditionally operationalized with the following heuristic formula: $\text{Nonresponse bias} = P_{\text{NR}} (\bar{X}_{\text{Res}} - \bar{X}_{\text{Pop}})$ where P_{NR} refers to the proportion of nonrespondents, \bar{X}_{Res} is the respondent mean on a survey relevant variable, and \bar{X}_{Pop} is the population mean on the corresponding survey relevant variable, if it were actually known (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). More important, in place of the mean shown in the nonresponse bias equation, other descriptive indices (e.g., a correlation coefficient) along with their corresponding population parameters can also be used. Examining this heuristic formula in detail, the possible range of bias depends on both the response rate—which bounds the extent to which the sample may be biased—and the distinctiveness of nonrespondents. The following two scenarios adapted from Fowler (2002) illustrate this point.

- Suppose a population of 100 is surveyed, and 90 respond (response rate of 90%). Of those 90, 45 say yes to some question; the other 45 say no. There are 10 people (the nonrespondents) whose views we do not know. If these nonrespondents would have responded with a yes, the true figure for the population would be 55% yes. If they would have responded with a no, the true population rate would be 45% yes. Regardless of the 90% response rate, the range is quite large, and it spans a region where either yes or no could have been the majority vote.
- Suppose a population of 100 is surveyed, and 10 respond (response rate of 10%). Of those 10, half say yes to some question; the other half say no. There are 90 people (the nonrespondents) whose views we do not know. If half of these nonrespondents had responded with a yes, the true figure for the population would be 50% yes—identical to what the sample results showed.

Nonresponse Bias Impact Assessment Strategy

Examining the heuristic formula and extreme scenarios above, it becomes evident that response rate alone is an inaccurate and unreliable proxy for study quality. We do not advocate that

Table 2
N-BIAS Techniques

Technique	Overview	Quality Rating
Archival analysis	Compare respondents to nonrespondents on variables contained in an archival database	2
Follow-up approach	Resurvey nonrespondents	2
Wave analysis	Compare late respondents to early respondents	1
Passive nonresponse analysis	Examine the relationship between passive nonresponse characteristics and standing on the key survey topics being assessed	3
Interest-level analysis	Assess the relationship between interest in the survey topic in question and standing on the key survey topics being assessed	3
Active nonresponse analysis	Assess percentage of purposeful, intentional, and a priori nonresponse using interviews	2
Worst-case resistance	Use simulated data to determine robustness of observed findings and relationships	2
Benchmarking analysis	Use measures with known measurement properties and normative data so that observed data can be cross-referenced	1
Demonstrate generalizability	Replicate findings use a different set of research methods	4

Note: Quality (1 = *lower quality* to 4 = *higher quality*) was assessed qualitatively by the authors of the article based on the conclusiveness of the evidence provided. N-BIAS = nonresponse bias impact assessment strategy.

improving response rates is a quixotic goal but rather that researchers' major efforts and resources should go into understanding the magnitude and direction of bias caused by non-response. We advocate that researchers should conduct a nonresponse bias impact assessment, *regardless* of how high a response rate is achieved. In the material below, we provide a conceptual outline of a nonresponse bias impact assessment strategy (N-BIAS). Overall, we view this process as similar to a test validation strategy (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). In amassing evidence for validity, each of several different validation methods (e.g., concurrent validity) provides a variety of insights into validity. Each approach has strengths and limitations. There is no one conclusive approach and no particular piece of evidence that is sufficient to ward off all threats. Likewise, assessing the impact of nonresponse bias requires development and inclusion of different types of evidence, and the case for nugatory impact of nonresponse bias is built on multiple pieces of evidence that converge with one another.

N-BIAS Methods

N-BIAS is presently composed of nine techniques (see Table 2). The first three techniques are only briefly reviewed as many researchers may already be familiar with them (for more information, see Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). The remaining six techniques are newer approaches that stem from recent research findings.

Technique 1: Archival analysis. The researcher identifies an archival database that contains the members of the whole survey sample (e.g., personnel records, school records, and membership information). After data collection, code numbers on the returned surveys (or access passwords) can be used to partition the information in the archival database into two segments: (a) data concerning respondents and (b) data concerning nonrespondents. Although some observed differences might exist, it is important to understand that these differences between respondents and nonrespondents (or the population in general) do not necessarily indicate response bias. Bias exists only when the observed archival differences are also systematically related to responses on the survey topic(s). For example, different response rates by gender are a concern only if gender is related to actual responses to the survey topic(s). To emulate the archival approach without the use of code numbers, a researcher can include specific survey questions to elicit information also found in the archival data set (e.g., gender). This technique allows for profile comparisons between the observed sample and the archival information gleaned for the entire initial sample (or population).

Technique 2: Follow-up approach. Using identifiers attached to returned surveys (or access passwords), respondents can be identified and by extension nonrespondents. The follow-up approach involves randomly selecting and resurveying a small segment of nonrespondents (typically an abridged survey is used) either by phone, mail, or e-mail. The collection of data from the follow-up sample, if generally *complete* (which may be unlikely), allows for meaningful comparisons between respondents and nonrespondents on actual survey topic variables. It is important to note, however, that if the special efforts to obtain the follow-up sample in any way influence responses, differences observed may be due to method effects rather than to true characteristics of nonrespondents.

Technique 3: Wave analysis. By noting in the data set whether each survey was returned before the deadline, after an initial reminder note, after the deadline, and so on, responses from pre-deadline surveys can be compared with the late responders on actual survey variables (e.g., compare job satisfaction levels). If late respondents differ from respondents, it most likely suggests that some level of bias exists. However, given that late nonrespondents are not “pure” nonrespondents in that they obviously did complete the survey, being similar to respondents does not conclusively indicate an absence of bias.

Technique 4: Passive nonresponse analysis. Rogelberg et al. (2003) found that the vast majority of nonresponse can be classified as being passive in nature. Passive nonresponse does not appear to be planned. Instead, passive nonrespondents may not have actually received the survey (unbeknownst to the researcher), might have forgotten about it, mislaid it, were ill, or just did not get around to doing it given other commitments (e.g., Peiperl & Baruch, 1997). Considering that the individuals who make up the passive nonresponse group seem, as a general rule, willing to participate in filling out the survey, it is not surprising that they generally do not differ from respondents with regard to job satisfaction or related variables. Thus, for most survey instances, bias is not created by passive nonrespondents. The only plausible instance in which passive nonresponse could create bias is where the survey assesses constructs that are indeed related to the reasons that passive nonrespondents fail to

return the survey. For example, passive nonresponse could present a problem when the survey topic in question is related to workload, busyness, or excess demands.

To conduct a passive nonresponse analysis, one should include questions on the survey that tap into factors related to passive nonresponse. Then during the analysis of the data, one can examine the extent to which these factors are related to standing on the focal topic. For example, if busyness is related to standing on the survey topic, response bias would be quite probable. If a relationship is detected, it may be possible to compensate by using the variable as a control variable. If a quantitative assessment of the relationship between these passive nonresponse factors and the content of the survey can not be undertaken, an analysis based on topically relevant theory and literature should still occur. Does theory suggest that these factors relate to the constructs in questions? Have a team of subject matter experts reflect and make judgments on this question based on their practical experience with particular variables and populations. Armstrong and Overton (1977) reported that a consensus among three judges resulted in only 4% of items incorrectly classified with respect to the direction of nonresponse bias.

Technique 5: Interest-level analysis. Researchers have repeatedly identified that interest level in the survey topic is related to a respondent's likelihood of completing the survey (e.g., Groves, Presser, & Dipko, 2004). As a result, if interest level is related to *attitudinal standing* on the topics making up the survey, the survey results are susceptible to bias. To conduct an interest-level analysis, researchers should include a few items that examine respondents' interest toward the particular topic. Subsequently, assuming an absence of range restriction, the researcher can investigate bias by assessing the relationship between responses to these items and responses to the actual survey topic(s). If significant relationships appear, bias most likely exists in the respondent sample. It may be possible to compensate for this bias by using interest level as a control variable—again assuming that there is enough variation in interest among the respondents to support this analysis.

Technique 6: Active nonresponse analysis. Active nonrespondents, in contrast to passive nonrespondents, are those who overtly choose not to respond to a survey effort. The nonresponse is volitional and a priori (i.e., it occurs when initially confronted with a survey solicitation). Active nonrespondents tend to differ from respondents on a number of dimensions typically relevant to the organizational survey researcher (e.g., job satisfaction, intentions to quit). Fortunately, the ability of this active nonresponse group to introduce bias is limited by their diminutive size. If the number of active nonrespondents to a survey effort is large, however, the potential for bias increases substantively. Survey researchers should try to estimate the magnitude of anticipated active nonresponse to proposed survey effort (see Rogelberg et al., 2003). This task can be accomplished at the early stages of the research by conducting interviews or focus groups with a random group of population members aimed at estimating the extent of anticipated and volitional nonresponse (e.g., ask employees their intentions to the specific survey situation in question). If the results show that the active nonrespondent group comprises a low proportion of the population, fewer concerns for bias arise. If the proportion of active respondents is greater than 15% of the group of individuals included in the interviews or focus groups (this has been the average rate in other studies), generalizability may be compromised.

Technique 7: Worst-case resistance. Given the data collected from study respondents in an actual study, one can empirically answer the question of what proportion of nonrespondents would have to exhibit the opposite pattern of responding to adversely influence sample results. By adding simulated data to an existing data set, one can explore how resistant a data set is to worst-case responses from nonrespondents. Taking a simple mean comparison as an example, let's say that women scored more highly than men on a particular scale. Using simulated data, one could add a distribution of low-valued responses to the group of women and/or high-valued responses to the group of men to estimate the proportion of nonrespondents that would be needed to force researchers to draw the opposite conclusion from the data (i.e., men score higher than women). Using a realistic distribution of simulated data (i.e., not just a collection of responses at the most extreme scale value), it may become evident from this exercise that an absurdly large proportion of the nonrespondent pool would have to exhibit the opposite pattern of results to make substantive change to the conclusions drawn from the actual data.

Technique 8: Benchmarking analysis. Many constructs of organizational interest—such as organizational commitment—are measured using established scales that have national norms. These norms provide mean scale levels for a variety of subgroups. Other evidence, such as validity studies pertaining to these scales, may also contain other distributional information such as standard deviation, skewness, and so forth. Subsequent studies that use these scales should replicate those distributional characteristics, within the limits of statistical error. Therefore, assuming one has scale norms available that are appropriate to the characteristics of a sample, demonstrating similarity between one's sample results and a set of norms is an additional argument for an absence of nonresponse bias. This capability also demonstrates an important benefit to using established scales for organizational research.

Technique 9: Demonstrate generalizability. By definition, nonresponse bias is a phenomenon that is peculiar to a given sample under particular study conditions. Triangulating with a sample collected using a different method or varying the conditions under which the study is conducted should also have effects on the composition of the nonrespondents group. For these reasons, replicating a set of findings across multiple data samples is another compelling method of demonstrating an absence of substantive nonresponse bias.

In many of the N-BIAS techniques described above, one is amassing evidence for the absence of nonresponse bias by making comparisons and tests that preferably lead to non-significant statistical results. But the probability of failing to find a statistically significant effect when one is, in fact, present—typically referred to as beta in discussions of the null hypothesis significance test—is directly related to statistical power and closely connected to sample size. Thus, a convincing body of evidence against nonresponse bias depends on having substantial sample sizes to conduct the N-BIAS analyses.

Future Research Agenda

The N-BIAS approach was constructed on the basis of our current understandings of nonresponse to organizational surveys. It should most appropriately be labeled N-BIAS 1.0

in that future advancements should lead to amendments and improvements. As our knowledge base increases, so should our ability to more accurately assess whether our data are representative and without substantive bias. In this spirit, we propose what we see are the most pressing research needs below. They appear in two parts: (a) study of respondents/nonrespondents and (b) study of response rates/facilitation.

Study of Respondents/Nonrespondents

Organizational context. An organizational survey differs from political polling/consumer survey types in several subtle ways (Rogelberg, 2006). For example, potential respondents to organizational surveys usually have a relatively close connection to the survey sponsor (e.g., their organization's management). In addition, with organizational surveys, respondents have beliefs about the track record of inaction or action with respect to past organizational surveys. Potential respondents may also perceive greater risk associated with completing an organizational survey as opposed to a polling or consumer survey (e.g., possible repercussions). Future work needs to examine whether research in one survey domain can effectively generalize to the other domain—can we safely extend all we know about public polling and marketing surveys to employee surveys? Are there particular dimensions of the survey context that limit generalizability? On a related note, future work should attempt to more systematically examine the impact of situational variables (as close as possible to the date of survey administration) on survey response. For example, we need research on how current workload, unexpected assignments, seasonal differences in business activity, or related factors enhance or reduce individuals' likelihood to respond to organizational surveys.

The active/passive model. Research should continue to examine active nonrespondents and passive nonrespondents. Research to date has divided active and passive respondents on the basis of a behavioral-intentions measure that must be administered to a complete respondent pool. If we knew more about these different groups and how to predict the composition of their membership, the necessary processes of quantifying the extent and causes of active nonresponse could be simplified. Are there typical rates of active and passive nonresponse to different types of survey efforts? How stable is active nonresponse? Can an active nonrespondent be "won" over? Can active or passive nonresponse groups be further broken down into subtypes? For example, evidence suggests that for some passive nonrespondents, dispositional factors (e.g., low conscientiousness) explain their failure to respond, whereas for others, situational factors are more influential (e.g., lost the survey; competing priorities). Likewise, it may be possible to divide active nonrespondents on the basis of the nature and origins of their concerns—for example, an objection to being over-surveyed versus substantive concerns with the organizational environment.

Predictors and covariates. A range of additional predictors of nonresponse/response are worthy of examination, such as specific personality traits (e.g., prosocial personality, reciprocity wariness), affective states, and organizational cynicism. As one of our N-BIAS techniques, we suggested measurement of interest level in the survey topic as a bias assessment

and control variable, but no standard measure of interest in a survey topic exists. A normed measure of survey interest would help researchers understand the impact of this variable on their survey results. More generally speaking, additional work on organizational survey response norms should be conducted. Research shows that prevailing social norms affect participation in marketing and political surveys (e.g., Bosnjak, Tuten, & Wittman, 2005; Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000). It is possible that organizations also have prevailing social norms related to culture and climate that influence whether responding to surveys is seen as a desirable citizenship behavior.

Multi-level issues. When examined at an aggregate level, nonresponse data may shed light on organizational variables of concern. For example, if certain teams, units, or departments have lower response rates than other departments, this result may be indicative of some important underlying differences in job satisfaction or organizational commitment. At present, relatively little of the nonresponse literature has examined any level of analysis between the individual and the organization. It is likely, however, that team, unit, and department-level issues (e.g., team cohesion) affect response rate and that, in turn, non-response bias may affect results of multi-level analyses conducted at these differing levels of aggregation. Future research should use multiple levels of analysis when examining response rates. Researchers should try to understand and predict unit-level response rates by identifying variables that relate to unit-level response.

At a larger scale, one multi-level issue of great concern to multinational organizations is the effect of culture on survey response behavior. Although examples of cross-cultural research on survey response do exist, many of these studies are conducted by creating models at the individual level of analysis or by comparing group means. The use of multi-level techniques to understand the effect of culture as a context surrounding organizational survey response might provide useful insights to those study administrators charged with obtaining culturally diverse samples.

A positive organizational behavior approach. In most research on nonresponse, the lion's share of attention is focused on nonrespondents, why they fail to respond, and how best to convert them to respondents. The motivations and barriers associated with nonresponse are the primary focus of the research. In the spirit of positive organizational behavior, we need more research on what motivates respondents to actually respond to organizational surveys and how they expect their results to accomplish positive change in the organization. This is particularly noteworthy in that motivated respondents often have better item completion rates and respond to the survey with greater effort and care (Rogelberg, Fisher, Maynard, Hakel, & Horvath, 2001). Relatedly, it would be worthwhile to examine how past survey experiences and behavior predicts future survey response behavior. Organizations provide a survey context that is unlike marketing and polling applications because employees are generally expected to respond to a series of surveys over a period of years. Are there serial respondents and nonrespondents? Almost no research has examined "within-person" response rate issues, but the organizational context is the perfect setting for conducting this variety of research.

Survey length and oversurveying. Usable techniques for reducing scale length and survey size have existed for several years now (see Stanton, Sinar, Balzer, & Smith, 2002), yet

the typical scale length on organizational surveys does not appear to have diminished as a result. Long organizational surveys that are frequently administered inevitably lead to a feeling among employees that they are tired of taking surveys, and this in turn reduces response rate. We need additional research on methods to prevent oversurveying both by reducing the average survey length and by reducing the frequency with which organizational surveys are administered. In addition, we need evaluation research to assess the extent to which these techniques are useful for enhancing response rates. On a related note, in the presence of low response rates within their organizations, survey administrators often undertake extensive efforts to facilitate response (e.g., multiple reminders). Paradoxically, these efforts may lead to a stronger feeling of being oversurveyed on the part of employees and thus may inadvertently diminish future response rates. Whether or not this is true and the extent of this effect is another worthwhile empirical question.

Innovative Internet techniques. A common observation in the popular press is that the “current generation” is more used to playing video games than reading books. Regardless of the extent to which this is true, and whether or not it has a future impact on business communication, it is certainly the case that the Internet provides substantial new opportunities for researchers to collect their data using methods quite different from the traditional paper-and-pencil Likert-type scale (see Rogelberg, Church, Waclawski, & Stanton, 2002; Stanton & Rogelberg, 2001). Efforts such as *The StudyResponse Project* have shown that the Internet can be used advantageously to help researchers understand how nonresponse may be affecting their research. The Internet also provides opportunities for simulations, role-playing, participant observation, and other data collection methods that may help to counteract survey fatigue and research challenges related to nonresponse.

In addition to the research agenda described above, organizational science as a field would benefit from three larger initiatives. First, our principal journals should develop editorial statements addressing nonresponse and expectations on how the authors should address it in their research. Second, the field would benefit from a sincere effort to address the oversurveying phenomenon in organizations. This is a particularly relevant concern with the growing popularity of Internet surveys and the ease with which the Internet and other related technologies allow for virtually instantaneous contact with employees and the public in general. Preventing potential research participants from being oversolicited with research requests begins with educating our students and clients about the merits of alternative research methodologies (e.g., focus groups) and on the various circumstances when other research techniques are preferable to surveys. Together with this education, we advocate the development of organizational survey registries designed to monitor survey use, carefully plan survey efforts, and prevent poor surveys from being conducted.

Finally, we advocate the creation of a survey respondent “bill of rights” endorsed by our major professional societies. The bill of rights would suggest that researchers need to treat potential survey respondents as a finite and depletable resource: a resource that needs to be respected, protected, and nurtured. The bill of rights would detail the social responsibilities researchers have to research participants. This list should go beyond what is required by ethics committees and should address initiatives that promote a sense of goodwill toward our research. For example, participants should be entitled to feedback concerning their participation in our research (e.g., summary of results). In addition, participants should not be

subject to unreasonably extensive reminders or invitations to participate in research projects. A constant barrage of e-mail solicitations or reminders to participate in research seems the surest way to anger potential research participants and discourage their participation. In addition to its ethical purpose, participant debriefing should be informative and educational. Finally, particularly in applied settings, research participants should be informed regarding what actions (at the very least, explain inaction) will come from the research data collected.

The Feature Topic Issue

We served as action editors on a set of submissions to *Organizational Research Methods* that the journal solicited in 2005 on the topic of nonresponse to organizational surveys. The solicitation invited “conceptual (i.e., new theory) and literature review papers,” as well as “papers offering guidelines and best practices that are based on solid empirical work published previously (these would be useful for people who are planning on conducting a survey.” We received more than 25 submissions for this feature topic, and all papers were subjected to the journal’s rigorous double-blind review process. With the vital assistance of editorial assistant Barbara Stephens; the journal’s editor, Herman Aguinis; and a cadre of dedicated reviewers, this review process led to the acceptance of five very strong papers that have begun to address the research agenda described above.

Rose, Sidle, and Griffith (in press) have started to address our call for positive approaches to motivating respondents with their innovative field experiments on the size and presentation of token monetary rewards. The use of token rewards presented at the time of solicitation has served as a staple of public opinion polling for years and has generally demonstrated substantial positive effects on response rate. The technique has not seen extensive use in the context of organizations, however, perhaps because organizational researchers see their research participants as a captive audience that already receives material rewards from the organization. Nonetheless, Rose, Sidle, and Griffith have shown that token monetary incentives have a beneficial effect within the organizational context, and they have laid the groundwork for a very productive line of future research on this topic.

Lyness and Kropf (in press) have responded to our call for multilevel examinations of nonresponse with their examination of cross-national differences in response rates. The substantial differences in response rates from organizational units in different national contexts should provide a wake-up call to any researchers who hope that a one-size-fits-all approach to improving response rates can work when deployed internationally. Their study also provides intriguing evidence concerning the impact of interest in survey topic on response rates. Given the increasingly global nature of the business climate for many companies, an awareness of how national and cross-cultural influences may affect organizational survey response is particularly apropos.

Allen, Stanley, Williams, and Ross (in press) have provided sobering evidence about the impact of nonresponse on the results of studies that involve measuring workgroup diversity. This article also responds to our call for examining nonresponse from a multi-level point of view. The article reports a set of simulations that demonstrate the powerful effects that nonresponse may have on the outcomes of group research. These researchers’ conclusions also amply demonstrate our warning concerning the danger of naming a particular response rate as

“acceptable.” In their study, response rates in excess of 60%—a level of response of which many researchers would be envious—still led to substantial distortions in observed correlations.

Thompson and Surface (in press) examined how employees feel about taking surveys online, whether dissatisfaction with Web-based survey media discourages response, and the representativeness of attitudinal data produced by workers who opt to complete an online climate survey. This study addresses our call for the in-depth analysis of Internet-based data collection techniques used in organizational contexts. It is noteworthy how they went about examining their research questions: They demonstrated how creative and multifaceted (both qualitative and quantitative) approaches can advance our understanding of issues pertaining to nonresponse in ways that single modality studies can not.

Werner, Praxedes, and Kim (in press) provided an interesting snapshot of the organizational science literature and its propensity to conduct the type of N-BIAS analyses we advocate below. They reviewed publications from nine journals over 5 years. Only 31% of the relevant survey studies in their sample reported some type of nonresponse analysis. They also found that articles in low-quality journals, articles in journals with long review times, and articles with larger response rates were less likely to report nonresponse analysis. Although they acknowledge that nonresponse analyses may be being performed behind the scenes for reviewers without a report of the results appearing in the published article, this trend should be of great concern to organizational science researchers. It provides compelling fuel to our claim above that our principal journals should develop editorial statements addressing nonresponse and expectations on how the authors should address it in their research.

To conclude, we offer our sincere thanks to all of the authors who submitted proposals and manuscripts to the feature issue, as well as to all of the scholars who volunteered to serve as reviewers for these articles. As a group, these articles comprised a large measure of timely and high-quality scholarship, and we regret that space and scheduling limitations precluded inclusion of more of this fine work in the feature topic. To the authors whose articles do appear in this issue we offer our congratulations for persevering through a challenging review process, and to the editorial staff of the journal we owe a debt of gratitude for your assistance and support in bringing this feature topic to fruition.

References

- Allen, N. J., Stanley, D. J., Williams, H., & Ross, S.J. (in press). Assessing the impact on non-response on work group diversity effects. *Organizational Research Methods*.
- Armstrong, J. S., & Overton, T. S. (1977). Estimating nonresponse bias in mail surveys. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14 (Special Issue: Recent Developments in Survey Research), 396-402.
- Baruch, Y. (1999). Response rate in academic studies—A comparative analysis. *Human Relations*, 52(4), 421-438.
- Bosnjak, M., Tuten, T. L., & Wittman, W. W. (2005). Unit (non)response in Web-based access panel surveys: An extended planned-behavior approach. *Psychology and Marketing*, 22, 489-505.
- Cook, C., Heath, F., & Thompson, R. L. (2000). A meta-analysis of response rates in Web- or Internet-based surveys. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 60, 821-836.
- Crossley, H. M., & Fink, R. (1951). Response and non-response in a probability sample. *International Journal of Opinion & Attitude Research*, 5, 1-19.
- Deming, W. E. (1953). On a probability mechanism to attain an economic balance between the resultant error of response and the bias of nonresponse. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 48, 743-772.
- Dillman, Don A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method*. New York: John Wiley.

- Fowler, F. J. (2002). Challenges for standardizing interviewing. *Contemporary Psychology: APA Review of Books*, 47(4), 405-407.
- Fox, R. J., Crask, M. R., & Kim, J. (1988). Mail survey response rate: A meta-analysis of selected techniques for inducing response. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 52, 467-491.
- Groves, R., Presser, S., & Dipko, S. (2004). The role of topic interest in survey participation decisions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 68, 2-31.
- Groves, R. M., Singer, E., & Corning, A. (2000). Leverage-saliency theory of survey participation: Description and an illustration. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64, 299-308.
- Heberlein, T. A., & Baumgartner, R. (1978). Factors affecting response rates to mailed questionnaires: A quantitative analysis of the published literature. *American Sociological Review*, 43, 447-462.
- James, J., & Bolstein, R. (1990). The effect of monetary incentives and follow-up mailings on the response rate and response quality in mail surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54, 346-361.
- Luong, A., & Rogelberg, S. G. (1998). How to increase your survey response rate. *The Industrial/Organizational Psychologist*, 36, 61-65.
- Kraut, A. I. (1996). Introduction: An overview of organizational surveys. In A. I. Kraut (Ed.), *Organizational surveys: Tolls for assessment and change* (pp. 1-14). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lyness, K. S., & Kropf, M. B. (in press). A multilevel examination of cross-national differences in mail survey response rates. *Organizational Research Methods*.
- Peiperl, M. A., & Baruch, Y. (1997). Models of careers: Back to square zero. *Organizational Dynamics*, 35(4), 7-22.
- Rogelberg, S. G. (2006). Understanding nonresponse and facilitating response to organizational surveys. In A. I. Kraut (Ed.), *Getting action from organizational surveys: New concepts, methods, and applications* (pp. 312-325). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rogelberg, S. G., Church, A. H., Waclawski, J., & Stanton, J. M. (2002). Organizational survey research: Overview, the Internet/intranet and present practices of concern. In S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 141-160). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Rogelberg, S. G., Conway, J. M., Sederburg, M. E., Spitzmuller, C., Aziz, S., & Knight, W. E. (2003). Profiling active and passive-non-respondents to an organizational survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(6), 1104-1114.
- Rogelberg, S. G., Fisher, G. G., Maynard, D., Hakel, M. D., & Horvath, M. (2001). Attitudes toward surveys: Development of a measure and its relationship to respondent behavior. *Organizational Research Methods*, 4, 3-25.
- Rogelberg, S. G., & Luong, A. (1998). Nonresponse to mailed surveys: A review and guide. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7, 60-65.
- Rogelberg, S. G., Luong, A., Sederburg, M. E., & Cristol, D. S. (2000). Employee attitude surveys: Examining the attitudes of noncompliant employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(2), 284-293.
- Rose, D. S., Sidle, S., & Griffith. (in press). A penny for your thoughts: Monetary incentives improve response rates for company-sponsored employee surveys. *Organizational Research Methods*.
- Rubin, D. (1987). *Multiple imputation for nonresponse in surveys*. New York: John Wiley.
- Stanton, F. (1939). Notes on the validity of mail questionnaire returns. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 23, 170-187.
- Stanton, J. M., & Rogelberg, S. G. (2001). Using Internet/intranet Web pages to collect organizational research data. *Organizational Research Methods*, 4, 199-216.
- Stanton, J. M., Sinar, E. F., Balzer, W. K., & Smith, P. C. (2002). Issues and strategies for reducing the length of self-report scales. *Personnel Psychology*, 55(1), 167-193.
- Suchman, E. A., & McCandless, B. (1940). Who answers questionnaires? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 24, 758-769.
- Thompson, L. F., & Surface, E. (in press). Employee surveys administered online: Attitudes toward the medium, nonresponse, and data representativeness. *Organizational Research Methods*.
- Tomaskovic-Devey, D., Leiter, J., & Thompson, S. (1994). Organizational survey response. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39, 439-457.
- Weiner, S. P., & Dalessio, A. T. (2006). Oversurveying: Causes, consequences, and cures. In A. I. Kraut (Ed.), *Getting action from organizational surveys: New concepts, methods, and applications* (pp. 294-311). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Werner, S., Praxedes, M., & Kim, H. G. (in press). The reporting of nonresponse analyses in survey research. *Organizational Research Methods*.

- Yammarino, F. J., Skinner, S. J., & Childers, T. L. (1991). Understanding mail survey response behavior: A meta-analysis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55, 613-639.
- Yu, J., & Cooper, H. (1983). A quantitative review of research design effects on response rates to questionnaires. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 20, 36-44.

Steven G. Rogelberg is a professor of organizational science and psychology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He also serves as director of Organizational Science and director of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He has more than 50 publications addressing topics like organizational research methods, team effectiveness, employee well-being, work meetings, and organizational development.

Jeffrey M. Stanton, PhD, is an associate professor at Syracuse University. He studies organizational behavior and technology, in particular how behavior affects security and privacy in organizations. He is author of "The Visible Employee: Using Workplace Monitoring and Surveillance to Protect Information Assets—Without Compromising Employee Privacy or Trust" (2006, *Information Today*).